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SUBJECT: KAREN NATIONAL UNION AND KAREN NATIONAL LIBERATION
ARMY ACTIVITIES IN REFUGEE CAMPS IN THAILAND

REF: STATE 107330

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN SUTTON, REASON 1
.4 (B, D).

11. (U) This message responds to reftel request for information about Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) activities in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border.

12. (C) Detailed, concrete information about KNU and KNLA activities in the seven camps where Karen make up the majority of the population is difficult to obtain. We are not aware of any systematic studies of this subject. Reports about such activities are anecdotal and impressionistic. UNHCR representatives and the head of the largest NGO that works in the camps provided the information for this message. The NGO head has spent over 20 years in his position. The seven Karen camps are Tham Hin, Ban Don Yang, Nu Po, Umpiem Mai, Mae La, Mae La Oon, and Mae Ra Ma Luang.

13. (C) The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), based in Mae Sot City, is the organization that provides general direction to the individual Karen camp committees, and their subcommittees. These committees and subcommittees are responsible for managing activities in the camps in conjunction with a Thai camp commander who is a civilian official and the international NGOs that provide food, housing, health, education, and sanitation services. The NGOs typically have a mix of expatriate and Karen staff. NGO and UNCHR representatives are not permitted to remain in the camps overnight except in case of emergency. Thai security officials are responsible for providing security around the perimeters of the camps. The camp committees have also traditionally been responsible for security in the camps and the administration of justice, though UNHCR has begun to assume a larger role in the latter.

14. (C) It is likely that the KNU has influence over the KRC and the camp committees and in turn over internal camp administration. The extent of that influence appears to vary across the camps. It is not clear how much the KNU intervenes in day-to-day camp administration, and in any event, decisions are made in cooperation with the NGOs and the Thai camp commander. KNU influence has reportedly diminished over time, and particularly since 1995, as its strength has been reduced by defeats by the Burmese Army and lost control of territory in Burma. Increased NGO and UNHCR presence in the camps over time has also created alternative sources of influence.

15. (C) The NGO head stated that there are no KNLA military activities, training, or command centers in the camps. The camps do not serve as bases for the KNLA. UNHCR reports that

periodic sweeps by the Thai have turned up weapons, but it appears that no significant weapons stores exist in the camps. At the same time, the camps are porous and it is likely that some KNLA officers and soldiers come and go and can also live in the camps for extended periods. NGOs and UNCHR do not see armed soldiers. Families of KNLA soldiers live in the camps.

¶16. (C) Some Karen from the camps likely become KNLA soldiers.

However, it does not appear that the camp committees have quotas or carry out conscription. Young persons are not dragged out of camps to join the KNLA. To the extent they enter the KNLA, they probably do so out of peer pressure or a desire to help in the fight against the Burmese Army.

¶17. (C) According to the NGO head, small amounts (about two percent) of the food distributed in the camps goes to the KNU. It is unclear what happens to that food. Given the basic and small nature of the NGO camp rations, it is possible that some is consumed in the camps by KNU members and their families or KNLA family members. Some may go to KNU and KNLA members outside of the camps. It is also possible that some medical supplies leak out to the KNU or KNLA.

¶18. (C) This message was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.
BOYCE